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ABSTRACT

Retirement is a life cycle phase most couples can now expect to experience. Research on retirement has been directed primarily toward the impact of retirement on the retiree, rather than on the marital dyad. Qualitative and quantitative changes that women experience were investigated, with regards to their role as wife in response to their husband's retirement. Three issues of the woman's role as housewife were examined: personal, relational and life cycle. Four hundred male retired teachers and their wives were surveyed by questionnaire, with a subsequent interview sample (N=253), drawn from returned questionnaires. Findings indicate that the major shift for women was toward increased accommodation to their husbands' needs, and the negative changes experienced by women were offset by increased opportunities for nurturing of spouse. (Author/BMW)

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WHAT DO I DO WITH HIM 24 HOURS A DAY?

CHANGES IN THE HOUSEWIFE ROLE AFTER RETIREMENT*

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Although most couples can now expect to experience a retirement phase of the life cycle, research on retirement has been primarily directed toward the impact of that life cycle event on the individual retiree, rather than on the marital dyad. In addition to its personal implications, the retirement of one partner also has an impact on his family, particularly his spouse (Kerkhoff, 1964; Lipman, 1961). Little is known about the reaction of women who have not had full time work careers prior to their husbands exit from the work role. The purpose of this study was to investigate the qualitative and quantitative changes that women experience in their role as wife in response to their husbands' retirement. It also examines the effect of his retirement on several aspects of both husbands and wives satisfaction with the marital relationship.

Evidence from research and informal sources is that women do respond to their husbands retirement from work in quantitatively and qualitatively different ways than their husbands. However, the nature of those differences remains unclear. A few studies point to the increased centrality of the role of housewife in retirement (Kline, 1975). Some propose a concurrent increase in satisfaction with that role (Brubaker, 1975; Keating-Groen, 1977). Others talk about general changes in role conceptions but do not delineate clearly those changes (Fox, 1977, Lipman, 1961). None explore the interaction between qualitative changes in role conceptions and levels of satisfaction with those roles.

Inconsistencies in findings may result from lack of

delineation of facets of the housewife role which are open to change in response to retirement. For example, women may be more satisfied with the increased amount of nurturing but less so with the changes in interaction with friends. Rather than a global measure of satisfaction which might mask such specific differences, the authors studied three areas of the housewife role around which perceptions may change at retirement. These areas do not necessarily encompass all the complexities of the housewife role. However they provide a basis for exploration of perception of change in those particular areas. The three areas studied were: relational issues, personal issues and life cycle issues.

A discussion of changes in the marital relationship is basic to an assessment of how women's roles change in response to the retirement of their husbands. Two facets of that relationship that have received some attention are communication and the division of household tasks. Lipman (1961) states that a shift at retirement in the role complexes of "husband" and "wife" results in a change in patterns of communication between spouses in which the new emphasis is on "non-sex-differentiated supportive roles that demand expressive rather than instrumental qualities." If women value the expressive, communicative aspects of their role and if the opportunities for expression increase with time spent with spouse in retirement, women should be highly satisfied with communication with spouse in retirement. Lipman also says that couples increase their sharing of household tasks upon retirement so

that role differentiation by sex is reduced. Keating-Groen (1977) however found that after a post retirement period of increased sharing, most couples reverted to their pre-retirement division of roles. Two issues to be clarified here are both the amount of and satisfaction with role interchangeability.

The marital relationship is set in a larger context of social network which is also affected by an event such as retirement. For the worker, contact with colleagues is usually reduced or eliminated at retirement. This change may have a different impact on men than women because of some variance in their preferred modes of meeting their intimacy and friendship needs. Keating-Groen (1977) says that among middle class couples women tend to look outside the conjugal pair to meet many of their friendship and intimacy needs while men prefer to meet those needs within the marriage. Interaction with ones spouse in retirement may meet the needs of husbands more than those of wives and losses upon retirement of interpersonal relationships outside the couple may be felt more keenly by women.

Little is known about the meaning of spouses retirement for women nor its effect on their morale. Thurnher (1974) says that retirement may "evoke stress...in goals and aspirations, and in the maintenance of personal identity and self esteem". Retirement of one's spouse may force acknowledgement that certain life goals will never be reached.

Finally, changes in one's role as housewife at retirement must be considered in the context of what is unique about that phase of the life cycle. Heyman (1970) says that married women adapt more easily to the retirement phase of the life cycle since they identify with the role of homemaker throughout their lives and give up or change only part of that central role in response to life cycle events. Role discontinuities faced by women seem to facilitate adaptation to life cycle changes (Lopata 1966; Dunkel, 1972). Faced with less abrupt change and more experience with change, women may be more staisfied with the retirement phase than their husbands. Women's perception of the retirement stage as qualitatively different from other stages remains unexplored.

Relationship, personal and life cycle elements of the housewife role in retirement were investigated with two purposes in mind. First the relative satisfaction of women as compared to men in communication, division of roles, social network, morale and life cycle stage were measured. Second, wives and husbands' perceptions of qualitative changes in these aspects of her role were also explored.

Methods

The sample consisted of 400 retired teachers and their wives and was drawn randomly from the files of the Superannuated Teachers of Ontario. Men were 63-68 year old and had been retired within the past three years. Two research instruments, a questionnaire and an interview were used in

this study. The questionnaire measured relationship, personal and life cycle elements of the housewife role.

Relationship issues included those within and outside the conjugal pair. Internal issues measured consisted of satisfaction with marital communication and satisfaction with the dividion of household tasks. The relational issue whose focus is primarily external to the marital dyad is social network satisfaction. This measure tapped satisfaction with the level of interaction with friends and relatives. A related variable, satisfaction with contact with children, was deleted because ninety-two percent were highly satisfied with contact with children. Personal issues studied comprised the morale scale which included global questions such as "How satisfied are you with the way you spend your time?". Also included were items regarding loss of job, and feelings about status and productivity. The third area called life cycle issues was a scale designed to tap acceptance or rejection of negative sterotypes regarding retirement. This scale was called stage satisfaction.

Interview questions were developed after the completion of questionnaire items. They were taken directly from the questionnaire but were presented as open rather than forced choice questions. Couples were mailed two copies of the questionnaire. Returned questionnaires indicating that women had had a full time career during the previous ten years were eliminated from the sample. Sixty-eight percent of men (N=136) and fifty-eight point five percent of women (N=117) returned completed questionnaires. Twenty-five couples were

drawn randomly from those who returned completed questionnaires. Each couple was interviewed concurrently but separately.

Questionnaire data were analysed in two steps. The first step was to run Pearson Correlations among all variables. The relationship among the five dependent variables (communication satisfaction, role satisfaction, social network satisfaction, morale and stage satisfaction) were sufficiently low so as not to violate assumptions of independence. Step two was an analysis of covariance. Interview data were coded by two independent coders who assessed perceived role changes.

Relationship Issues

Marital Communication

There were no male-female differences in satisfaction with levels of communication in retirement nor did couples increase the absolute amount of communication. The reasons for this lack of increase in communication differed for men and women and are illustrated by male-female differences in perceived disadvantages of retirement.

Fifty-six percent of men and only 12% of women reported no disadvantages of retirement. Of disadvantages cited by women, most (72%) were changes within the relationship including decrease in personal freedom, too much togetherness and too many demands on their time. For men the biggest disappointments were outside the relationship with 40% missing contact with business colleagues. Only 4% of men had regrets about too much time together.

As few men saw relationship related disadvantages in retirement, there was no logical impetus for discussion of shifts in relationship aspects of marital roles. On the contrary, women experienced distinct changes in their roles including less privacy and a shift from internal to external structuring of demands on their time. Not all women saw these shifts in roles as requiring changes. Approximately one-third of women made no conscious effort to influence the quality of their time together either by concrete changes or through discussion with spouse. For these women pleasure of time with spouse and satisfaction in feeling needed seemed to offset loss of personal freedom. For the most part this meant planning separate activities and was often done by not only planning her individual activities but his as well, usually without consulting him. A third group of women continued to regret their lack of privacy and freedom but took no action. These women were unhappy about their role changes but saw themselves with few alternatives. For these women, increased time together was associated with decreased choice about how one spends personal time.

With the exception of the previously mentioned group, women were generally satisfied with levels of communication with their spouses. Accomodations to their husbands retirement were seen as individual concerns to be resolved by oneself. Any decrease in women's freedom was apparently offset by increased centrality of their housewife role.

Household Tasks

There were no significant male-female differences in satisfaction with division of household tasks. Also in constradiction to previous research there were no significant increases in role interchangeability from pre to post retirement. After an initial focusing on roles within the marriage initiated by increased time together, most couples seemed relatively satisfied to continue their pre-retirement involvement in household chores.

Although shifts in interchangeability of household tasks were not the norm for couples in this sample, women did experience qualitative changes in that facet of the housewife role. Completion and organization of household tasks required more energy. Not only was there more work to be done, but the scheduling of such work was done in response to his needs. The husbands' interests took priority over the wives' household duties so that women consciously rearranged their household schedules to be more responsive to their spouses. Rather than a shift from the importance of household tasks to companionship aspects of marriage as suggested by Lipman (1961), women took on additional responsibilities in both areas.

Social Network

The majority of men and women (65% and 74% respectively) reported no post retirement change in amount of contact with friends and relatives. Women, however were significantly more staisfied with interaction outside the marriage than were

their husbands.

In planning activities primarily with a couple focus, women changed from their pre-retirement orientation in which social activities were more clearly divided into individual and couple activities (Keating-Groen, 1977). Women previously had had several hours each day which were theirs to independently structure without consideration of their husbands' needs. The change for women comes from their perception of a need to include their husbands and with this shift comes a decrease in personal freedom. Also apparent for women in the area of social network is a change from internal to external structuring of planning. Before their husbands' retirement, women were freer to plan activities and contact with others based on personal needs. After retirement planning is based on what they think are their husbands' needs. This shift results in less time available for leisure after women have met their family obligations.

Wive's expectations that their husbands need or want them to make these changes may be misguided. There is no evidence in this study that these retired men wanted a broader social network or replacements for loss of contact with business colleagues. Some men, however, were aware of changes their wives had made and were not happy with their sacrifices.

Patterns of leisure activities of men and women in retirement substantiate the differences in orientation toward social network. Men preferred individual activities (62%) over group related activities whereas women's primary preferences were group oriented (75%). If women prefer group oriented

activities and men's preferences are to individual pursuits, one option would be encourage husbands to adopt preferences of wives. Wives' guilt at leaving their husbands alone may be based more on wives need to be with people than husbands'.

Women's social network is qualitatively different after retirement. The distinction between individual and couple activities is blurred with couple oriented activities pre-eminent. Consequently the locus of planning moves from internal to external with womens' perception of husbands' needs the primary motivating force. This shift is accompanied by an increased responsibility to plan felt by women and accompanying uneasiness or guilt if they continue with old patterns. Women's high satisfaction with their social network seems based on satisfaction of nurturing needs filled through these shifts in their social network.

Personal Issues

Morale

There were no significant differences in morale scores of husbands and wives although retired couples had signficiantly higher morale than a matched group of pre-retired couples (Keating-Groen, 1977). High levels of morale of both retired husbands and their wives are related to the increased focus on the marital dyad by both men and women in retirement. For women, evidence of this focus is found in such areas as increased responsibility for spouse, decrease in individual activities, increased amounts of energy spent on household tasks. The link between higher investment in the marital

relationship and high morale is described by Brubaker (1975) who says that for the retiree the marital relationship becomes the primary source of social reinforcement in the absence of work. If the retiree shifts his focus from work to marriage and if his spouse confirms this new emphasis, the individual's morale increases with a subsequent increase in satisfaction with his marriage. Loss of status, associated with retirement, may be the catalyst which results in a disequilibrium which in turn is resolved by an increased investment in the marriage.

For men then a positive correlation between morale and marital satisfaction in retirement is predictable. For women too the marital dyad can become the centre of identity confirmation. Women in this study expressed a need to be supportive to their husbands after his retirement and did so by making qualitative changes in the housewife role. Their husbands, for the most part, responded positively to these changes and had high morale scores which in turn had a positive effect on womens' self esteem.

Life Cycle Issues

Stage Satisfaction

Despite numerous changes in the role of housewife, women were significantly happier than men with the retirement stage of the life cycle. Whereas men are faced with being less productive, less useful, not needed, women suddenly have the task of introducing their spouses to a life outside of work which women know well. For women who in some sense have been 'out of a job' since their children were launched, this new

sense of being needed could well lend purpose to their lives.

Men were generally unaware of their wives supportive behaviour during the period of adaptation to retirement. When asked how their wives had been supportive to them during that time, 56% of men said they had not been supportive. The largest group of women (56%) said they had been actively supportive by doing such things as creating things for him to do, inviting people in, dropping her plans to accommodate to his, taking care of him. Another 40% of women indicated passive support through acceptance, patience and not disclosing their worries. It may be that women in this group were sufficiently supportive and flexible and their husband's passage to retirement was so smooth that men did not recognize the need for that support. An equally plausible interpretation is that women's needs to nurture exceed the needs of their husbands to be nurtured. As one man said: "I didn't need her help. I can take care of myself." Either conclusion can be traced to the limited husband-wife communication about the retirement process. Both indicate a lack of coordination between needs and role changes in retirement.

Implications for Women

Teachers and their wives have special resources to help them adjust to retirement. These include a comprehensive pension plan which most couples in this sample (86%) found adequate to maintain their pre-retirement standard of living. Teachers also have two months of relatively unstructured time in the summer which can be used for anticipatory socialization to the retirement phase. There was no indication from this

sample that retirement from work triggers great amounts of anxiety or unhappiness. On the contrary, these retired men and their wives had significantly higher morale scores than a matched sample of pre-retired teachers.

The passage to retirement did trigger changes in women's conceptions of their role as wife. For the most part these changes were experienced positively and women were happier with the retirement stage than were their husbands. The major shift for women was in the direction of more perceived external structuring of their activities so that daily planning from socializing to scheduling of household tasks was done with a couple rather than an individual focus. Change in the perspective of the housewife role is functional for the adaptation of both husband and wife to retirement. The negative changes experienced by women (loss of privacy, reduction in her social network, loss of independence) are offset by increased opportunities to nurture in a manner that had not been possible since children were launched. Her increased focus on the marital relationship may help her husband in his process of passage from the work role in which his activities were primarily externally structured, to increased freedom and personal structuring of activities in retirement.

Retirement of one's spouse does have an impact on women. Adaptation to his retirement is functional for the marital system, as well as for the woman herself despite individual changes experienced negatively by some women.

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